

Warning Signs of Homelessness

Note: While these are considered warning signs, please recognize that they only offer general guidance. There is significant variability within the school-age homeless population. Individual students may differ significantly from the following general characteristics.

Lack of Continuity in Education

- Attendance at many different schools
- Lack of personal records needed to enroll
- Inability to pay fees
- Gaps in skill development
- Mistaken diagnosis of abilities
- Poor organizational skills
- Poor ability to conceptualize

Poor Health / Nutrition

- Lack of immunizations and/or immunization records
- Unmet medical and dental needs
- Increased vulnerability to colds and flu
- Respiratory problems
- Skin rashes
- Chronic hunger (may hoard food)
- Fatigue (may fall asleep in class)

Transportation and Attendance Problems

- Erratic attendance and tardiness
- Numerous absences
- Lack of participation in after-school activities
- Lack of participation on field trips
- Absences on days when students bring special treats from home
- Inability to contact parents

Poor Hygiene

- Lack of shower facilities/washers, etc.
- Wearing same clothes for several days
- Inconsistent grooming (well-groomed one day and poorly groomed the next)

Lack of Privacy / Personal Space

- Consistent lack of preparation for school
- Incomplete or missing homework (no place to work or keep supplies)
- Unable to complete special projects (no access to supplies)
- Lack of basic school supplies
- Loss of books and other supplies on a regular basis
- Concern for safety of belongings
- Refusing invitations from classmates

Social and Behavioral Concerns

- A marked change in behavior
- Poor/short attention span
- Poor self-esteem
- Extreme shyness
- Difficulty trusting people
- Aggression
- "Old" beyond years
- Protective of parents
- Clinging behavior
- Developmental delays
- Fear of abandonment
- School phobia (student wants to be with parent)
- Need for immediate gratification
- Anxiety late in the school day

Reactions / Statements by Parent, Guardian, or Child

- Exhibiting anger or embarrassment when asked about current address
- Mention of staying with grandparents, other relatives, friends, or in a motel, or comments, such as
 - "I don't remember the name of our previous school."
 - "We've been moving around a lot."
 - ".Our address is new; I can't remember it" (may hide lack of permanent address).
 - "We're staying with relatives until we get settled."
 - "We're going through a bad time right now."
 - "We've been unpacking, traveling, etc." (to explain poor appearance and/or hygiene).

(These warning signs were adapted from flyers developed by the Illinois and Pennsylvania Departments of Education.)

Tips for Identifying Homeless Children and Youth

Familiarity with potential warning signs is a first step in identifying children and youth who may be homeless. Effective identification also requires additional analysis of information already being collected by the district and community outreach. Consider the following strategies suggested by local school districts:

- Sort and list students by address and note occurrences of the same address for more than one family.
- Review mailing labels. When printing newsletters or other mailing labels, note occurrences of the same address for more than one family.
- Become familiar with local motel addresses. Look up the addresses of low cost motels, and note when families/students list them as their own.
- Make personal contacts with the front desk staff at motels, low-cost health facilities, police stations, and other public service facilities. Ask them to notify you when they meet homeless families with children.
- Post educational rights of homeless children in schools and throughout the community where families will see them. (NCHE posters can be ordered or downloaded at <http://center.serve.org/nche/products.php>.)
- Disseminate brochures or flyers that explain the educational rights of homeless children; offer suggestions to ensure children are enrolled in school quickly and offer contact information for additional help. Send a supply to family and youth shelters, social service agencies, health departments, and other service providers that work with homeless families and youth.
- Familiarize staff with the McKinney-Vento Act's definition of homelessness.
- Enroll the child or youth immediately. Missing records may be an indicator of homelessness. Contact the previous school to have the records sent. Develop a procedure to assess students for placement purposes if academic records are not immediately available.
- Offer assistance if you think a family may be homeless.
 - Assure families that their children can enroll even if the family does not have a "regular place to live" right now.
 - If possible, take the family to a private location when enrolling.
 - Offer help in completing forms. Hesitation may indicate an inability to read.
 - Provide the student with supplies needed to take into the classroom.
 - Arrange for free school meals.
 - Be sensitive, patient, calm, and reassuring.